

# DIME NOVEL ROUND-UP

A monthly magazine devoted to the collecting, preservation and literature of the old-time dime and nickel novels, libraries and popular story papers.

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## Bibliographical Reflections

By Denis R. Rogers



### DIME NOVEL SKETCHES NO. 181

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## Bibliographical Reflections

By Denis R. Rogers

During my visit to New England last Fall your editor suggested that an article on bibliographical research might prove of interest. The idea arose from a discussion of Jack Bales' useful survey of reference books in the September 1974 issue of "The Round-Up."

Since returning home to England I have been trying to condense my reflections on over thirty years of bibliographical research into article form. My aim had to be to offer fellow HHB members ideas for their consideration, in the hope that their own bibliographical research might benefit from my experiences.

In my opinion there are three primary factors--temperament, scope and reference tools.

Without the right temperament it is impossible to produce a meritorious bibliography. The characteristics required by a good bibliographer are patience, tenacity, humility, unselfishness, thoroughness and orderliness.

Patience, tenacity and thoroughness are important allied virtues in that impatience leads to inaccuracy and thoroughness invariably requires tenacity. The purpose of a bibliography is to provide a guide for other people and so it is unpardonable to offer hastily produced work in order to secure fast publication. All too often this form of impatience is excused by some such euphemism for a poorly finished work as "a useful pioneer effort." A pioneer work can be more of a hindrance than a help for reference purposes if the material it contains is a jumble of established fact and uncorroborated assumption.

I will return to this point when discussing the scope factor. At this juncture, therefore, I will do no more than cite Miller's "Dime Novel Authors: 1860-1900" as the classic example of a pioneer work, the value of which was irretrievably marred by a glut of guesswork. If only the work had been limited to proven pen names plus suggestions based on sound circumstantial evidence, with the latter clearly identified, "Dime Novel Authors" would have been a work of lasting importance.

Orderliness is vital, since the man who does not think clearly will be unable to adopt the discipline needed to produce an accurate, well laid out reference work. A perfect example of accurate, orderly presentation is "The House of Beadle and Adams" by the late Professor Albert Johannsen.

At first blush it may seem odd to rate humility and unselfishness alongside the other characteristics desirable for the compilation of a good bibliography. Humility was selected because there is a very real danger, as one becomes more knowledgeable about one's chosen subject, of the head swelling. When that happens, circumstantial evidence is no longer evaluated properly, the expert's bias militating against sound judgments. Indeed, where conceit has really got a grip, even proven facts can be ignored if facing up to

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them would reveal the falsity of earlier conclusions. The conscientious bibliographer should always bear in mind that, even if he lives to be one hundred years old, he'll never know it all. Once upon a time there was a member of the HHB, who regarded himself as the leading authority on dime novels. There is no doubt that his knowledge of the subject was extensive and that he possessed an enviable talent or flair for making fresh bibliographical discoveries. Unfortunately, however, some of his assertions, stated as fact, were unsubstantiated, thereby bringing into question his whole standing as an expert.

Unselfishness is stressed because very few bibliographers have either the time or the money to undertake all the necessary research themselves. A great deal of help can be obtained from the reference divisions of libraries, provided one frames one's enquiries in concise terms, designed to reduce the burden on the busy librarian to the absolute minimum. Most libraries are understaffed and overworked: consequently while, almost without exception, librarians are keen to help, they cannot devote a lot of time to answering a single enquiry, since that would cause inordinate delays in answering other enquiries. If you do not try to put yourself in the busy librarian's shoes, either you will get a dusty answer or be told that there are research workers available who will carry out the desired checking for a fee.

Employing a research worker is a luxury if, by deferring the work, you could visit the library yourself within a reasonable space of time. There will be occasions, however, when the employment of a research worker cannot be avoided. Remember then that, since no two people think exactly alike, it behooves you to brief him explicitly.

A cost saving possibility worth exploring is the aid of a fellow member of the HHB living in the neighborhood of the library holding the material you need researched. Not all our members are research minded and some are not well placed to help, so don't feel upset if you get a negative response. Where a fellow member is willing and able to help it is only fair to pitch your research brief as reasonably as possible. Also, if you are in a position to reciprocate, you should certainly offer to do so. Having access to the British Museum here in London I have been able to enjoy mutually profitable arrangements with quite a few HHB members over the years. Moreover I made new and lasting friends in the process.

May I suggest that you should be punctillious in acknowledging help received? I make a point of thanking librarians for their assistance, even when the results are negative. Negative results may be disappointing, but the librarian is not to blame for that and, after all, negative research is by no means valueless. I believe that, no matter how busy a librarian may be, he will be pleased to learn that his efforts have been appreciated and not merely accepted as a right. There is another simple courtesy that I should like to commend to you. When you approach a library or, for that matter, a HHB member for the first time, be sure to enclose a stamped addressed envelope to cover the hoped for reply.

A veteran member of our Brotherhood wrote an article for "The Round-Up" not long since. Subsequently he mentioned in correspondence that he had received a number of letters following publication, most of which were enquiries as to whether he could sell them the items discussed in the article. In not one instance had the enquirer bothered to enclose a stamped addressed envelope! My own practice is simple. When someone writes to me out of the blue I only reply when he has enclosed a stamped addressed envelope, unless I am the beneficiary from his letter (i.e., he is giving as well as or instead of seeking information).



Another discourtesy must be mentioned before passing on to the second of our three primary factors. It is the failure to give credit for information supplied. The same HB member mentioned in the previous paragraph has answered enquiries only to find the information published later as if it were the author of the article's unaided discovery. Moreover there have been instances where data, given with the proviso that it be kept confidential pending the completion of continuing research, has been divulged without permission.

More often than not research begins without any idea of a bibliography emerging; indeed the start is often almost accidental. In my own case, for example, it was the re-discovery of my boyhood collection of Cassell English editions of books by Edward S. Ellis, during my first visit to the old homestead at the end of the Second World War, that set me on the long research trail.

My initial researches at the British Museum were aimed at preparing a check list of the author's work and many is the time since then that I've wished I'd kept fuller notes. A tip for the beginner, therefore, is that, even if you don't want to bother taking notes, you should at least note down your sources. If you have recorded the sources of your information you are in a position to go back to make full notes at a later date. Otherwise there could be exasperation and frustration should the research bug get into your blood. Even if you escape that pleasant disease the chances are that your source notes could be useful to some other member of the HHB at some later date. Noting sources doesn't involve much work; all that is needed is enough for re-identification. Of course, where the source is a long running reference work such as the Publishers Weekly, the volume and page number are sensible additions.

It is highly desirable to get the scope of your proposed bibliography defined at an early date, since that decides the range of records you need to build up and to maintain. When you change courses in mid-stream, your personal reference records often need alteration or amendment. Jettisoning an index is simple, but adding a new or re-arranging an existing index is both time consuming and hazardous—hazardous because errors and omissions are much harder to avoid when revising than when building up and time consuming because a new index all too often involves a re-check of source material.

My own experience illustrates this admirably. After I had well nigh completed my bibliography of Edward S. Ellis, his grand-daughter produced an account book containing a concise record of his receipts from all sources year by year from the early 1860s until his death in 1916. As was to be expected with such a prolific writer that record brought to light many new potential sources of published Ellis material, which just could not be ignored. Since that unexpected information goldmine came to my notice I have traced many major Ellis works that, otherwise, might have remained undiscovered. Naturally those discoveries will have to be slotted into the already near completed manuscript and that has involved substantial revision of almost all my reference index and the preparation of one or two new index to facilitate the manuscript revision.

Before making a decision on the scope of your bibliography it is advisable to consider the project from two standpoints. The first standpoint is what has already been published on your chosen subject and what other bibliographies, if any, are in preparation. If there is an existing bibliography the demand for your work is likely to be affected, even if your approach to the subject is different. The adequacy of the earlier bibliography is imma-



terial; its very existence, especially if it is still in print or not long out of print, will diminish your chances of success. If you decide to persevere, notwithstanding, it becomes particularly important for you to concentrate on excellence.

The second standpoint is time. It is stating the obvious, perhaps, to say that the wider the scope of your work the greater the amount of time you will need to compile it. You should give serious thought, therefore, to the amount of time you can afford and are prepared to expend on compilation. In general the more comprehensive a bibliography the more likely it is to be of lasting significance. In any work of this nature, however, there are facets which, while interesting, are not vital to its purpose. Much time can be saved by resisting the temptation to embellish your bibliography with unessential, even if attractive features.

The amount of time you ought to devote to compilation can also be affected by the scope of your subject. When a bibliography is published the demand comes from (a) the collectors and booksellers and (b) the reference libraries. The collector demand and consequently the bookseller demand wanes as the generation recalling the subject matter nostalgically passes away, whereas the reference library demand tends to remain more constant on account of the librarian's long term interest in having reference material readily available. For example the collector demand for dime novel bibliographies is waning fast, because the generation recalling such reading matter in youth is dying off.

The amount of time you can afford to devote to research is equally important. It is useless attempting an ambitious project if your personal circumstances restrict the amount of spare time you can devote to research. I am assuming for the purpose of this article that you are not one of those fortunate few, who can obtain sabbatical leave to progress a bibliographical project and so can travel freely.

Having settled the scope it is important to let the reader know exactly what your bibliography covers and to explain fully its structure at the outset. My view is that there should be no rigid conventions for the presentation of bibliographical data. The field is so vast that a flexible approach is highly desirable. The only musts appear to me to be that the structure should be logical in the context of the determined scope and that presentation should be consistent.

It is absolutely essential to give the full background where data stems from conjecture and not from proof. For example, in "A Guide to Edward S. Ellis," I have included a chapter on the many different pen names used by, ascribed to or otherwise linked with Edward S. Ellis, giving the proof for or against Ellis ownership or the pros and cons where doubt remains.

That's enough of opinions and general advice, so I'll hasten on to the practical aspects of bibliographical research. Before offering some advice on the use of the standard reference works set out in Mr. Bales' article, here are brief details of my personal reference tools for the compilation of "A Guide to Edward S. Ellis":

- A. A card index of main and sub-titles, maintained alphabetically. This is cross-index to B below.
- B. Record books of works connected with Edward S. Ellis, numbered chronologically and broken down by categories as follows:
  - a. major works definitely by Edward S. Ellis;
  - b. major works probably by Edward S. Ellis;
  - c. major works possibly by Edward S. Ellis;
  - d. major works ascribed to but definitely not by Edward S. Ellis;



e, f, g, h. minor works as for a, b, c and d, the demarcation between major and minor being a length of 10,000 words, except that a work of less than 10,000 words published separately is treated as a major work.

Establishing whether a work should be classified as major or minor does not involve counting all the words, except very rarely. If you take one or two long paragraphs, add up all the words and then divide by the number of lines, you will arrive at a roughly reliable average number of words per line. It is then a simple matter to establish the probable length by multiplying the total number of lines by that average number. In ninety-nine out of a hundred instances the result will leave no room for doubt as to whether you have a major or a minor work: that will be true no matter what figure you choose for length classification. In my many years of research I have only had to count all the words in two Ellis serials before being able to determine their importance. Neither of those counts was much of a chore, for it really does not take long to count 10,000 words.

- i. copyright, "author of" and other works ascribed to Ellis, of which no published edition has as yet been found.
- C. A card index of first lines of text, being enough of the opening of the narrative text (i.e., ignoring any heading or poem preceding the opening of the story) to fill one line of type.
- D. A card index of principal characters in the works of fiction.
- E. Correspondence files, prefixed by an index sheet as soon as the number of documents renders it impossible to refer back to a particular letter without a search.
- F. A notebook of useful information—e.g., chapterization details of serials—linked to an alphabetical card index.
- G. A card index, arranged alphabetically, of information gleaned about the many different publishers of works by Edward S. Ellis.
- H. A loose leaf record of the books in my Ellis reference collection, showing the cost of each item and kept at my place of work, for insurance purposes. This record has been built up as items have been acquired and so has been indexed for ease of reference, as well as being split between dime novels and paperbacks, cloth bound books, including non-fiction works, and periodicals, micro-films, xerox reproductions, etc.
- I. In so far as it is impossible to display my reference collection, storage is arranged in suitable segments, with all the containers well marked for ease of reference—e.g., cloth bound books by publisher, dime novels by series, periodicals in runs and microfilms on reels within small boxes.

I am not suggesting that you need all or indeed any of the above personal research tools, but a few words of explanation as to why I adopted some of them should serve to underline the advantage of keeping organized records for reference purposes. Of course, until you have determined the scope of your bibliographical project, you cannot establish the records appropriate to your needs.

(To be continued)

#### RECENTLY PUBLISHED ARTICLES CONCERNING DIME NOVELS

TWO AMBASSADOR MAGAZINE, January 1975. "Could Horatio Alger's Heroes Make It In Today's Business World?" by Ralph D. Gardner. The cover illustration shows the decorative title page from Alger's "Ragged Dick" Series, with Dick surrounded by Ben, the Luggage Boy, Mark, the Matchboy and Rufus, the Newsboy. Good article by the ace of Alger collectors. The magazine has a circulation of some two million copies monthly.

**MEMBERSHIP CHANGES**

- 334 Richard A. Miozza, 280 Mulberry St., Fall River, Mass. 02720 (New mem.)  
 112 Gerald Goldman, 295 Main St., Buffalo, N. Y. 14203 (New address)  
 250 Dr. Leslie Poste, Box 68, Geneseo, N. Y. 14454 (New address)  
 335 Babe Swift, 28 Colin St., Yonkers, N. Y. 10701 (New member)  
 336 Karen Nelson, 109 Walter Library, Univ. of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minn. 55455 (New member)  
 337 Virgil G. Jackson, 94 West Water St., Beaver Dam, Wis. 53916 (New member)  
 338 Floyd E. Stewart, Star Route, Eden Mills, Vt. 05653 (New member)

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Lounsberry—Rob Ranger's Mine. S&S Medal Library No. 236, G .....	6.50
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\* \* \* \*

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## WANTED

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